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SUMMARY

1. PURPOSE. To provide security and policy review on the document at Tab 1 prior to release to the public.

2. BACKGROUND. C2C Allison Egan, C1C Ashley Christ, C1C Tobiah Kroskob, and C1C Jessica Adams have all prepared presentations for Colorado Springs Undergraduate Research Forum (CSURF). The presentations are titled respectively: REALITY OF VIOLENCE AS A PRODUCT OF IRRESPONSIBILITY; WILLIAM FAULKNER, DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY, AND THE OLD SOUTH; RAPE OF CHARLOTTE TEMPLE AND VICTIM-BLAMING; AMERICA, LINEARLY CYCLICAL.

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Tabs:

1. REALITY OF VIOLENCE AS A PRODUCT OF IRRESPONSIBILITY
2. WILLIAM FAULKNER, DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY AND THE OLD SOUTH
3. RAPE OF CHARLOTTE TEMPLE AND VICTIM-BLAMING
4. AMERICA, LINEARLY CYCLICAL

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English 490

17 Dec 2013

The Dysfunctional Family Unit and the Putrefaction of the Old South

“Jesus, the South is fine, isn’t it. It’s better than the theatre, isn’t it. It’s better than Ben Hur, isn’t it. No wonder you have to come away now and then, isn’t it...I just want to understand it if I can and I don’t know how to say it better. Because it’s something my people haven’t got. Or if we have got it, it all happened long ago across the water and so now there aint anything to look at every day to remind us of it. We don’t live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves (or have I got it backward and was it your folks that are free and the niggers that lost?) and bullets in the dining room table and such, to be always reminding us to never forget. What is it? something you live and breathe in like air? A kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago? A kind of entailed birthright father and son and father and son of never forgiving General Sherman, so that forevermore as long as your children’s children produce children you won’t be anything but a descendant of a long line of colonels killed in Pickett’s charge at Manassas?”

-William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom* (217,361)

William Faulkner, one of the most prolific American writers of the 20th century, examines various themes including race, gender, socioeconomic tensions, the Southern landscape, and the modernist viewpoint of space and time. However, one of Faulkner’s most poignant themes woven through each of his works is family, specifically the dysfunctional family unit. In fact, Faulkner uses genealogies and complex family lineages as a metaphor for the ultimate dysfunctional family unit of America and the fratricide between brothers during the Civil War.

Alongside the disintegration of the family unit, Faulkner depicts the splintering of the old southern order. As the critics Malcolm Cowley and Arthur Kinney agree, Faulkner focuses “on the idea that the Southern nation (like most of his own fictional heroes) was defeated from within” as “[w]e remember that for Faulkner the Great War was a battle within the family of man

and the War Between the States a battle of brother against brother” (351, 90). Thus, to understand Faulkner and his themes, one must first comprehend the use of the term “Old South”. Moreover, an examination of two of Faulkner’s most compelling families—the Compson’s in *The Sound and the Fury* and the Sutpen line in *Absalom, Absalom*—highlights the ways in which the breakdown of the family mirrors the destruction of the Old South.

Historians have extensively debated the notion of the Old South. For some, the Old South is merely a myth that exists in the minds of a portion of the Southern population. For others, the antebellum South represents a society that existed as a subculture to the North and antebellum America. An examination of the subculture of the South as a separate entity in the overall picture of America is supported by research that points to a unique set of values and social structures that set this region of America apart from the rest. This belief that the South existed as an anomaly to the overarching American culture is also known as *Southern Exceptionalism* which is defined as “the belief that the South has possessed a separate and unique identity...which appeared to be out of the mainstream of American experience” (Billington 1).

One aspect that makes the South distinct from the North is the focus on agriculture as the main economic stabilizing force as opposed to industrialization. In William Howard Russell’s publication *My Dairy North and South*, he writes that a South Carolinian told him that “[w]e are an agricultural people, pursuing our own system, and working out our own destiny, breeding up women and men with some other purpose than to make them vulgar, fanatical, cheating Yankees” (qtd in Billington 38). In addition, another Texan told Russell that “We are a peculiar people, sir!...We want no manufactures: we desire no trading, no mechanical or manufacturing classes...As long as we have our rice, our sugar, our tobacco, and our cotton, we command

wealth to purchase all we want” (78). Clearly, the philosophy of the antebellum South disagreed with the Northern pursuit of industrial development.

In addition to the Southern aversion toward non-agricultural economic products, the antebellum South possessed one “principal characteristic distinguishing the South from the rest of the country...—the persistence of ‘folk culture’ in the South (qtd. in McPherson 236). This “folk culture,” according to David Potter’s thesis on *Southern Exceptionalism*, is defined as an “emphasis on tradition, rural life, close kinship ties, a hierarchal social structure, ascribed status, patterns of deference, and masculine codes of honor and chivalry,” but “above all, the South’s folk culture valued tradition and stability and felt threatened by change” (qtd. in MacPherson 236). This highly ritualistic and patriarchal social structure is juxtaposed against the antebellum North that valued change and moved toward “impersonal, bureaucratic meritocratic, urbanizing, commercial, industrializing, mobile, and rootless characteristics” (qtd. in MacPherson 236). While some authors hint at this idea of Southern Exceptionalism, Faulkner not only embraces it as a backdrop for his works but also develops the Old South to such an extent that it becomes a *de facto* character working within the familial theme. In fact, Faulkner goes so far as to develop genealogies of the land itself. This concept of the Old South is vital to Faulkner’s filial themes and presentation of the breakdown of the nuclear family unit that pervades his works.

One of the most important elements of this “folk culture” was the “historical grounding of family roles and services in the South that placed from the start a unique emphasis on the very centrality of family” (Kinney 89). Within Arthur Kinney’s work “The Family-Centered Nature of Faulkner’s World,” he quotes sociologist John Demos’s viewpoint on the topic of family values in the South: “the individual household was the basic unit of everyday living, the irreducible cell from which all human society was fashioned. It formed, indeed the model for

ever larger structure of authority...religious and political communities were only families writ large” (qtd. in Kinney 89). For Southern society, the family was more than a mere unit one was born into; it was a functioning mechanism that was part of the overarching political machine. The family was itself an institution that provided social services that, in contemporary American society, are typically outsourced to other associations. For example, the sick and elderly in the Old South were absorbed into the nuclear family unit for care as were orphaned children and, in some cases, criminals (89). In contrast, today these sub-groups of society are funneled into nursing homes, foster care, and prisons. Faulkner’s work is especially effective as he portrays the family unit with the full emphasis the antebellum South placed upon it.

Perhaps the most well-known Faulknerian family are the Compsons. Examining this family, specifically through their development in *The Sound and the Fury*, reveals much about Faulkner’s message. It is clear from the beginning of the novel that this is not one of the typical, strong nuclear family units of the antebellum South. The Compsons are neither stable nor capable of taking care of the mentally ill or children. In fact, this family is the dysfunctional opposite of the antebellum Southern family: the parents cannot fulfill their assigned roles, one child struggles in silence with mental illness, another commits suicide, one falls prey to teenage pregnancy, and another child Faulkner himself describes as “the most completely evil character I ever created” (qtd. in Blake 325). Although the Compson family is one that has descended from the long line of the Southern aristocracy, since the Civil War the family has been in gradual decline.

As Robert Blake, a medical professional in psychology, points out, *The Sound and the Fury* provides a familial system that can be assessed through the family systems theory and in terms of the family life cycle approach. According to this theory which was developed by

Minuchin, the family is “a complex social unit with multiple roles and reciprocal relationships that exists in varying degrees of dynamic equilibrium or disequilibrium” while it also “evolves through stages of development, much in the same way an individual does, facing at each stage the challenge of accomplishing tasks and adjustments to avoid crises and to maintain social homeostasis and function” (qtd. in Blake 322). In other words, the family, like an individual, develops and matures into a unit that is either capable or incapable of assigning roles to certain members. Further, the fulfillment of these roles will either stabilize or destabilize the overall unit.

In the case of the Compson family, the first developmental obstacle the family faces is the inability of Mr. and Mrs. Compson to establish reciprocal relationships such as the vital mother-daughter and father-son dynamic. As Blake contends, the inability to “establish a reciprocal adult relationship in which individual and joint needs are met, Mr. and Mrs. Compson predictably fail as parents” (323). This failure causes the four children—Benjy, Quentin, Jason, and Candace—to look for parents in other figures. They look to Dilsey as a mother figure, yet her racial background eliminates her from being the complete mother the children need. Additionally, the children, especially Jason, try to find comfort in their grandmother Damuddy, but she dies early in their developmental process. With all other options exhausted, the boys—each in their own way—turn to their sister Candace or Caddy to fulfill their needs.

For Benjy, Candace functions as a “surrogate mother” and represents the “tenderness, affection, and care that he needs,” for she is “not just the center of his life, but of his entire world” (Blake 323). For Benjy’s obsessiveness with his sister, the one thing that ties his narration to reality is the common thread of elements reminding Benjy of Caddy. Benjy jumps from memory to memory through objects that remind him of Caddy. For example, in the first

scene of the work, Faulkner depicts the thirty-three year old, mentally retarded Benjy and the servant Luster walking through the pasture. Luster says to Benjy, “You snagged on that nail again. Cant you never crawl through here without snagging on that nail,” and instead of replying to Luster, Benjy’s inner dialogue recants “*Caddy uncaught me and we crawled through*” (Faulkner 3). Although Caddy is not with Luster and Benjy in this scene, the act of being snagged on a nail brings back a memory of Caddy. In another scene, Faulkner depicts Caddy coming home from school and Benjy is waiting in the cold for her. She runs to him and says “What is it...Did you think it would be Christmas when I came home from school. Is that what you thought? Christmas is the day after tomorrow. Santy Claus, Benjy. Santy Claus” (5). Here without a word from Benjy, Caddy knows exactly how to respond to and excite her mentally challenged brother. In contrast, Mrs. Compson also takes part in this scene by saying “Nobody knows how I dread Christmas. Nobody knows. I am not one of those women who can stand things. I wish for Jason’s and the children’s sakes I was stronger” (6). Mrs. Compson admits she is incapable of “handling things,” which is characteristic of her hypochondriac, uninvolved character. This is not only characteristic of Mrs. Compsons nature but also exemplifies her inability to relate to or parent her son with all of his challenges.

Quentin also depends on Caddy, but in a more complex way than Benjy does. Quentin “seeks from Candace the love and nurturing that he does not receive from his mother, but resents the need to do so”, and “treasuring his sister’s virginity as the symbol of family honor, he tries to function in a father role with her” (Blake 323). Quentin needs his sister’s nurturing more when he is a young adult, but as he matures and leaves for Harvard, he becomes more and more obsessed with Caddy’s sexuality. In fact, when Caddy is playing in the river her dress begins to get wet and muddy, so she takes it off. This scene foreshadows her future sexual indiscretions, as

“then she didn’t have on anything but her bodice and drawers, and Quentin slapped her and she slipped and fell down in the water” (12). Caddy’s sexuality represents the last moral standard of the Old South that may be upheld. When Caddy does not maintain her virginity, it is easier for Quentin to construct a story that he took it than to admit that it happened of her own volition. Quentin’s rambling mind repeats over and over “*I have committed incest I said Father it was I it was not Dalton Ames*” (Faulkner 51). Eventually his inability to save this last vestige of the Old South, Caddy’s virginity, drives Quentin to commit suicide.

Jason is as obsessed with Caddy as his two brothers are. However, he is not driven by love for her, but extreme hatred: “his anger toward women for failing to provide affection is directed at his sister” (Blake 324). In addition, he becomes increasingly frustrated with Caddy as his situation becomes more complex. He is reliant on Caddy and her marriage for a job, but he detests this reliance and cannot escape it because of his need to increase his social status through money (324). For Jason, Caddy is an object he may project his hatred upon, and in a very cruel way he takes revenge on Caddy through the treatment of her daughter Quentin.

The most disturbing aspect of the three brother’s obsession with their sister Caddy is that she is powerless in this situation and doomed to disappoint them. As Blake asserts, “the tenuous family equilibrium is destroyed by a normal developmental process, the emerging sexuality of Candace...this dysfunctional system, so dependent on Candace, cannot survive her transformation from a child into a woman” (325). It is natural for Caddy to sexually mature, but this development tears apart the delicate balance the family hinges upon. For example, within Benjy’s narration, he starts to whine and cry when he understands Caddy’s actions are related to her sexuality. Benjy continually asserts that Caddy smells like trees, except when, in an attempt to attract the opposite sex, she puts on perfume. In addition, he does not like it when she puts on

a mature dress. Benjy begins to whine, and Jason asserts, “He don’t like that prissy dress...you think you are grown up don’t you. You think you’re better than anybody else, don’t you. Prissy” (Faulkner 26). Here Faulkner depicts the aversion to Caddy’s maturation that both Jason and Benjy feel. Likewise, Quentin is obsessed with time and wants to stop time because the more time progresses the more mature Caddy will become, breaking apart the fragile family construct that has been built around her innocence.

The Compson family and its problems are the focus of this work. The familial issues both mirror and are a product of the downfall of the Old South. The Civil War occurred between the years 1861 and 1865, and the *The Sound and the Fury* spans the time period of approximately 1898 to 1928, or the post-antebellum period. This timeline is important as it illustrates that the Old South had already faced filial destruction in the form of the Civil War, just as the Compson family illustrates the breakdown of social order continuing for years after, moving toward a state of disorganization and dissolution. Finally, Blake emphasizes, “from a social and community perspective, the family is in a state of decline, as reflected in the dwindling property and in the family head’s desultory law practice” (325). The challenge for both the Compsons and the Old South in this post-antebellum era is to overcome their dysfunction and try to move on from this trauma.

While *The Sound and the Fury* is a story of a post-antebellum dysfunctional family, *Absalom, Absalom!* on the other hand, is a “story about the failure of the South seen as the failure to produce a viable family—whether because of incest, racism, jealousy, or inhumanity—a failure is shared by the Sutpens, the Bons, the Coldfields, the Joneses, and the Compsons” (Kinney 96). The work *Absalom, Absalom!*, in a broad context, parallels the disintegration of the South in many ways.

First, the title of the work *Absalom, Absalom!* alludes to family disintegration. Faulkner references the biblical figure Absalom, the son of King David. The details of this account found in 2 Samuel, outline a story in which the outraged Absalom, furious over the rape of his sister Tamar by their half-brother Amnon, engages in fratricide and kills his brother. In the same way, in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, Henry kills his half-brother Charles Bon in order to prevent Charles from marrying and consummating an incestuous marriage with their sister Judith. Henry says, "*You are my brother.—No I'm not. I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me Henry. Suddenly Henry grasps the pistol...Do it now Henry, he says...You will have to stop me, Henry*" (Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 358). Much like the Biblical Absalom, Henry kills his half-brother Charles because of a proposed union. Similarly, the Old South was the ultimate display of fratricide as brothers, cousins, uncles, grandfathers, and sons killed and fought one another to preserve the purity of their respective social orders—the North and the South. The title of *Absalom, Absalom!* holds multi-layered significance relating to both fratricide and familial honor.

Absalom, Absalom! is primarily focused on Thomas Sutpen and his role as a family man. In fact, Faulkner affirmed in a graduate course at Virginia that "the central character is Sutpen, yes. The story of a man who wanted a son and got too many, got so many that they destroyed him. It's incidentally the story of Quentin Compson's hatred of the bad qualities in the country he loves" (qtd. in Kinney 95). Sutpen does long for sons to validate his self-constructed Southern aristocracy and carry on the name he has built for himself.

From the hard labor he put into Sutpen's Hundred to the lengths he went to in order to sustain his social status, Sutpen's sheer will blinds him from seeing the sons that stand directly in front of him. Charles has made an impressive life for himself and only longs for the recognition

from Sutpen that Charles is, in fact, his son. Henry is also capable of carrying on the Sutpen lineage until Thomas corners him in an impossible place with the knowledge that if he does not kill his half-brother Charles, then he will be condoning the incestuous marriage with his sister. Thomas drives Henry away without giving him the chance to be the male heir he so desperately desires. Additionally, although Judith is a woman, she possesses all the qualities Thomas looks for in a son: she is stoically strong as she maintains Sutpen's Hundred throughout the Civil War, a time in which food and resources were abundantly scarce. Additionally, as a child, it was Judith, not Henry, who enjoyed watching Sutpen's slaves fight and racing the carriages to church. Judith is Thomas' most likely child to carry on his name, but because she is a woman, he dismissed her immediately.

In summary, the Compsons crumble from their own inadequate, ill-equipped, and dysfunctional family while the Sutpens fall apart due to violence and following the outdated social standards of the antebellum South as they function in a post-antebellum world—including the racism towards Charles and the sexism toward Judith. These familial aspects parallel the fall of the Old South. The Great War brought violence and the refusal to acknowledge slaves as humans—these are the Sutpens. In addition, the failure to build a successful infrastructure (roads, trains, factories) or transition to modern technology and perceptions—this is the Compsons. The destruction of the South was physical (guns, fire, etc.), but the destruction was also moral, psychological, sociological, and cultural. This brought tragedy, suffering, and destruction that was widespread and spanned a vast amount of time. Today, some of the antebellum Southern values and ideologies are still present in American culture.

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Documentation: A friend from home, Laura Crisp, proofread my paper and made grammatical corrections. She gave me a little bit of content advice that helped me to conclude the paper more thoroughly.